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Author(s): John Andrew Boyle

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The Hare in Myth and Reality: A Review Article

by JOHN ANDREW BOYLE

GEORGE Ewart Evans and David Thomson in their recent book¹ have presented us with a full-length study of an animal about which even today surprisingly little is known. Unlike John Layard,² who concerned himself only with the hare in myth and legend, they concentrate in the main upon the zoological facts, some of which are even stranger than the myth and legend. Not that they in any way neglect the rich mythology of the hare; on the contrary, the whole purpose of their concern with the natural history of the animal is to seek an answer to the puzzling question: 'Why is it that the hare has such a place in myth and story all over the world?'³ That the hare does figure largely in the popular beliefs of many peoples was brought home to me some years ago when collecting material for an article that has not yet seen the light of day. I should like to draw on that material for some marginal comments on a book which I have read with both pleasure and profit.

The writers of both Greece and Rome had some curious ideas about the zoology of the hare, as indeed of the animal world in general. Not all of these ideas are as absurd as at first sight they appear; and in one instance the Ancients have actually anticipated modern science. Evans and Thomson quote the statement of Aelian that the hare 'carries some of its young half formed in its womb, some it is in the process of bearing, others it has already borne'. They add that Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Pliny are often ridiculed for making similar statements about the process of superfetation, which, as has been recently demonstrated, does actually take place in the female hare.⁴ Aelian also mentions the hare's ability to sleep with its eyes open.⁵ The authors refer else-

¹ *The Leaping Hare* (Faber and Faber, 1972).

² *The Lady of the Hare* (London, 1944).

³ P. 14.

⁴ P. 24.

⁵ *De Natura Animalium* ii. 12.

where⁶ to this popular belief, which, as they say, it is impossible to prove or disprove. One is tempted, however, to draw attention to the statement of one of their informants, who used, in the winter months, to watch the mountain hare through field-glasses on the moors outside Nairn: 'He says that when it was sitting or lying down it looked as if it had been frozen to death or stuffed in a hunched up position like a cat that is feeling the cold. *Its staring eyes were like glass eyes.*'⁷ As for the classification of the hare — not indeed by the Greeks and Romans but by the Hebrews — amongst the animals that chew the cud, this is, as the authors show, an intelligible mistake inasmuch as the hare does digest its food twice, though not in the manner of ruminants.⁸

But the strangest of these ancient beliefs were those concerning the sex of the hare. Both Pliny⁹ and Aelian¹⁰ state that the hare is an hermaphrodite, the former, it is true, only on the authority of Archelaus, who maintained in his history of animals that goats breathed not through the nostrils, but through the ears!¹¹ And Aelian, quoted by the authors from Topsell, tells the story of a male hare that 'was once found almost dead, whose belly being opened, there were three young ones alive taken out of her belly. . .'¹² These beliefs survived into modern times, and not only among the common people. Agostino Nifo, the Renaissance philosopher, claimed to have seen a male hare big with young,¹³ and even Sir Thomas Browne, while denying that the hare was androgynous, asserted as a fact that the male animal did sometimes give birth to young ones.¹⁴ Evidently these 'vulgar errors' were still widely prevalent in the seventeenth century: it would be interesting to ascertain how much longer they persisted, for they seem now to have been completely forgotten.¹⁵

⁶ P. 207.

⁷ Pp. 36-37.

⁸ P. 26. (My italics).

⁹ *Naturalis Historia* vii. 81.

¹⁰ *De Natura Animalium* xiii. 12.

¹¹ See *Naturalis Historia* viii. 76.

¹² P. 24.

¹³ Quoted, pp. 24-25, from Topsell.

¹⁴ Quoted, p. 25, from the *Pseudoxia Epidemica*.

¹⁵ The belief was current in medieval Islam. The Arab historian Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1234), writing *sub anno* 623 A. H. (1226 A.D.), relates how a friend of his, when out hunting (presumably in the vicinity of Mosul, where the historian resided), caught a hare which he discovered to be hermaphroditic. Its belly was opened and found to contain two young ones. Ibn al-Athīr adds that he had the story both from his friend and from the latter's companions, who said that they had always heard that the hare was male one year and female the next but had not believed it until they had seen the evidence with their own eyes. See the *Kitāb al-Kāmil fī'l-Ta'rīkh* ed. Tornberg, xii (Leiden, 1853), 467.

That the hare was once regarded as a sacred animal by many of the peoples of Europe and Western Asia there can be little doubt. Leaving aside for the moment the wide-spread taboo against the eating of its flesh, we may say that the evidence is largely to be found amongst the Celtic inhabitants of the British Isles. Evans and Thomson recount the well-known story, ultimately derived from Dion Cassius,¹⁶ about Boadicea's releasing a hare that she had concealed in her bosom and causing a favourable augury to be drawn from its twistings and turnings as it sought to escape.¹⁷ They quote also much interesting oral information from Wales and Ireland about the hare as one of the forms adopted by witches for their nocturnal perambulations.¹⁸ In Wales such 'hare witches' ran in families, and Sir John Rhys tells how his own nurse belonged to one of these families and how his mother was considered to be rather reckless in entrusting him to her care, 'as she might run away at any moment, leaving her charge to take care of itself.'¹⁹

On the belief that a hare crossing one's path is a portent of misfortune the authors quote, in addition to modern oral material, the observations of Sir Thomas Browne.²⁰ This particular superstition is by no means confined to the British Isles. It is recorded to have been held by a thirteenth-century Lithuanian prince, a recent and lukewarm convert to Christianity;²¹ it is held by modern Turkish peasants,²² who, as we shall see, are unlikely to have inherited the belief from their nomadic ancestors and must in consequence have adopted it from the earlier inhabitants of Asia Minor.

The taboo, observed amongst so many peoples, against eating the flesh of the hare is compared by the authors with the modern repugnance to eating horsemeat. 'The horse,' they say, 'was once a sacred animal in Britain and his flesh was never eaten except on rare ritual occasions when the taboo was broken.'²³ This statement requires some qualification. That the horse was a sacred animal amongst the early Indo-European peoples is of course indisputable,

¹⁶ lxii. 6.

¹⁷ P. 218.

¹⁸ Pp. 156-177.

¹⁹ *Celtic Folklore* (Oxford, 1901), I, 294.

²⁰ Pp. 214-215 and 220.

²¹ See A. Brückner, 'Beiträge zur litauischen Mythologie', *Archiv für slavische Philologie*, IX, 1-35.

²² See Jean-Paul Roux and Kemal Özbayri, 'Quelques notes sur la religion des Tahtaci, nomades bucherons de la Turquie méridionale', *Revue des Études Islamiques* (1964), pp. 45-86 (p. 79).

²³ P. 96.

but the prejudice against eating its flesh seems to have had its origin in the Mediterranean area and to have spread only gradually into Northern Europe. It is asserted by Reinach on the basis of purely circumstantial evidence that this taboo was observed by the Gauls of Caesar's time.²⁴ On the other hand, the Germanic peoples, as we know from the testimony of the Church, ate horse-flesh as part of their normal diet both before and after their conversion to Christianity. In England the practise was tolerated by the ecclesiastical authorities, perhaps because it was in any case in the process of dying out. In the Penitential of Theodore of Tarsus, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 668 to 690, it is stated that 'they do not forbid horse [flesh], nevertheless it is not the custom to eat it.'²⁵ Similarly in the Confessional of Egbert (*ca.* 950–1000) it is laid down that 'horse flesh is not forbidden, though many nations refuse to eat it.'²⁶ On the Continent of Europe the Church employed very different language. In a letter to Boniface, the Apostle to the Germans, dated *ca.* 732, Pope Gregory III expresses himself as follows:

'You say, among other things, that some have the habit of eating wild horses and very many eat tame horses. This, holy brother, you are in no wise to permit in future but are to suppress in every possible way, with the help of Christ, and impose suitable penance upon the offenders. It is a filthy and abominable practice.'²⁷

The ban is repeated in a letter from Pope Zacharias dated 4 November, 751, in an interesting passage which lists the various wild creatures whose flesh the Church deemed unclean:

'First as to birds — jackdaws, crows and storks: these are absolutely forbidden as food for Christians. Beavers, hares and wild horses are still more strictly prohibited. However, most holy brother, you are well versed in all the sacred writings.'²⁸

That the ban long remained unheeded even in religious circles is

²⁴ See Salamon Reinach, 'Pourquoi Vercingétorix a renvoyé sa cavalerie d'Alésia', *Revue Celtique* (1906), pp. 1–15, republished in his *Cultes, mythes et religions*, III, 124–140; also Alexander H. Krappe, 'Old Celtic Taboos', *Folklore*, LIII, 196–208 (201–202).

²⁵ John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (transl.), *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York, 1965), p. 208.

²⁶ McNeill and Gamer, p. 248.

²⁷ Ephraim Emerton, *The Letters of St. Boniface* (New York, 1940), p. 58.

²⁸ Emerton, p. 161.

shown by the fact that amongst the benedictions composed by Ekkehard (*ca.* 1000–1060) of St Gall to be pronounced over the food served in the monastery was one referring to the flesh of wild horses.²⁹

Whether the Continental Celts observed the taboo against eating hare flesh we are nowhere informed. On the other hand in the description of Britain interpolated in Book V of Caesar's *Commentaries* we are told that the inhabitants of the island considered hares, chickens and geese as forbidden food, but did, nevertheless, keep these animals as pets.³⁰ We know too that both in Wales and in Ireland a prejudice against eating the flesh of the hare has survived into modern times.³¹ The taboo seems to have been unknown to the Germanic peoples. 'The hare,' says Archbishop Theodore, 'may be eaten, and it is good for dysentery; and its gall is to be mixed with pepper for [the relief of] pain'.³² But what was allowed to the Christian English was, as we have seen, denied to German converts from paganism. That the hare should have been included in Zacharias's ban is a little puzzling. Apart from the Jews no Mediterranean people seems to have had any scruples about eating its flesh, which was indeed regarded as a delicacy. Pliny praises the benevolence of Nature 'in making harmless and edible animals (i.e. rabbits and hares) prolific'.³³ It must have been the Jewish taboo that the pope had in mind. He refers Boniface to 'all the sacred writings.' i.e. to the Old as well as the New Testament, and each of the birds and mammals which he enumerates in his letter is covered, explicitly or implicitly, by the dietary laws in Leviticus.

Hare flesh was forbidden under the Mosaic Dispensation on the ground that while the animal resembled the edible ruminants in

²⁹ See Victor Hehn, *The Wanderings of Plants and Animals from their First Home* (London, 1885), p. 37. In Iceland the consumption of horseflesh was one of the heathen practices (the others being sacrifice to the gods and the exposure of new-born infants) which, after the nominal conversion of the country to Christianity, were tolerated for a while provided they were carried out in private. See G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 68.

³⁰ v. 12.

³¹ See Krappe, 'Old Celtic Taboos', p. 199.

³² McNeill and Gamer, p. 208. On the use of hare's flesh in folk-medicine see Charles J. Billson, 'The Easter Hare', *Folklore*, III, 441–466 (456–457); *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, III, 1520b–1524b. On its use in twentieth-century Morocco see Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London, 1926), II, 326–327.

³³ *Naturalis Historia*, viii. 81.

chewing the cud (a natural mistake, as Evans and Thomson have shown), it differed from them in not being cloven-footed.³⁴ On this taboo the Muslims, who follow the Jews in their rejection of pork, are divided among themselves. Shāfi'ī, (d. 819 or 820) the founder of one of the four orthodox sects of Sunni Islam, regarded hare flesh as lawful, while the earlier Abū Ḥanifa (d. 767) ruled that there was no harm in eating it because the Prophet had done so when it was offered to him roasted and had ordered his companions to eat it; also because it was not a carnivorous animal or one that ate carrion, but resembled the gazelle.³⁵ The desert Arabs seem always to have eaten it with relish. Bertram Thomas records an amusing Bedouin folktale of how the Prophet, annoyed with the hare's behaviour, declared its flesh to be *ḥalāl* (lawful) 'for all men to eat, every bit of you, even your bowels.'³⁶ On the other hand the Shiites will not eat the hare, and this attitude is so characteristic as to have earned them the Turkish nickname of *tavşan yemez* '[those that] do not eat hare.' Since this prejudice is shared by Muslim Persians and Christian Armenians one is tempted to postulate an Indo-European origin; it is possible, however, that in the case of both communities the custom is to be traced back to the legislation of Moses.³⁷

This food taboo, says Alexander H. Krappe, 'has been known in India and China since the dawn of history.'³⁸ There seems in fact to be no evidence that it ever extended eastwards of Persia. The law-books of ancient India specifically mention the hare as one of the animals whose flesh may be eaten at any time;³⁹ and even to-day, when most Hindus are vegetarians, the Rajputs still eat it.⁴⁰ For the situation in China Krappe derived his information, as

³⁴ Leviticus xi. 6.

³⁵ I am indebted for this information to Professor James Robson, Professor Emeritus of Arabic in the University of Manchester.

³⁶ *Arabia Felix* (New York, 1932), pp. 197-198.

³⁷ On the attitude of the Shiites, and in particular of the nomad woodcutters known as the Tahtaci of Southern Turkey, towards the hare see Roux and Özbayri, pp. 78-84. The Muslims of Morocco share the beliefs of the Shiites, but the taboo is apparently not strictly observed. See Westermarck, II, 326.

³⁸ 'Old Celtic Taboos', p. 199.

³⁹ It appears in the incongruous company of the rhinoceros, the iguana, the porcupine, the wild boar and the tortoise. See Julius Jolly, *Recht und Sitte*, *Grundriss der indo-arischen Philologie und Altertumskunde*, II/8 (Strasbourg, 1896), 157.

⁴⁰ Jolly, p. 158.

did Charles J. Billson⁴¹ and William George Black,⁴² from Dennys's *Folklore of China*,⁴³ in which it is stated that 'a prejudice against eating its [the hare's] flesh is coeval with Chinese history'.⁴⁴ I drew this statement to the attention of the late Dr Arthur Waley, and his comment was as follows:

'So far from the eating of hare being taboo in China, it has always been a favourite dish, as witness the proverb "It is the dogs that catch the hare, but those that follow the dogs who eat the hare-broth"'.⁴⁵

Dennys goes on to quote a passage from the *Erh-ya* to the effect that the people of Yoyang (a well-known place in Hunan, south of the Yangtse) 'considered the hare to be a telluric genius so that nobody dared to hunt it.'⁴⁶ Waley pointed out that this passage 'does not occur in the *Erh-ya* nor is the sort of information the *Erh-ya* gives.'⁴⁷ It does however occur in the commentary on the *Erh-ya* by Lo Yüan (1136-1184),⁴⁸ and is apparently the sole basis for Dennys's mistaken assumption that a taboo on hare flesh had existed in China since time immemorial. Such a taboo, it may be added, was equally absent from the steppes to the north of China: what evidence there is shows that both the Hsiung-nu or Huns and the T'u-chüeh or early Turks hunted and ate the hare.⁴⁹

⁴¹ 'The Easter Hare'. On p. 450 he includes the Chinese 'among the many widely-separated peoples with whom this taboo occurs.'

⁴² 'The Hare in Folk-Lore', *Folk-Lore Journal*, I, 84-90. On p. 89 he speaks of 'the Chinese refusing to eat of it from the earliest dawn of Chinese history.'

⁴³ London and Hongkong, 1876. A reprint by the Oriental Press, Amsterdam, appeared in 1968.

⁴⁴ P. 64.

⁴⁵ In a communication dated 31 July, 1962.

⁴⁶ *Folklore of China*, p. 64.

⁴⁷ In a letter dated 18 July, 1962. The *Erh-ya*, a work often assigned to the twelfth century B.C., is 'a guide to the correct use of many miscellaneous terms, including names of animals, birds, plants etc.' See Herbert A. Giles, *A History of Chinese Literature* (London, 1901), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁸ I am indebted for this information to Miss Margaret I. Scott of the Cambridge University Library.

⁴⁹ Of the Hsiung-nu we are told by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145?-90? B.C.): 'The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they shoot foxes and hares, which are used for food.' See Burton Watson (transl.), *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (New York and London, 1961), II, 155. In the funerary inscription of the great Turkish statesman and general Toñuquq (dating from ca. 720 A.D.) we read how the T'u-chüeh after rebelling against the Chinese made their home for a while in a wooded mountainous region, probably somewhere in the Southern Khangai, where they lived on wild game and hares. See E. Denison Ross, 'The Tonyukuk Inscription', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, VI, 37-43 (38).

But if the taboo was not observed in India and China, this is by no means to say that the hare was not a sacred animal in those countries. 'It was in India . . .,' as Evans and Thomson justly remark, 'that there originated the most widely known story connecting the hare with the moon; and it is likely that the rich, moon-hare myths were diffused by the spread of Buddhism from India to much of Asia, particularly China.'⁵⁰ And they reproduce a Chinese version of the famous story of how the hare threw itself upon a fire to provide a meal for the Buddha disguised as a hungry traveller; and how the Buddha rewarded its self-sacrifice by causing it to be placed in the moon.⁵¹ The story is curiously dissimilar from the European myth of the man with a bundle of sticks on his back 'doomed to reside in the moon till the end of all things' as punishment for gathering firewood on the Sabbath.⁵² In India the story in its essentials must be older than Buddhism. The Classical Sanskrit *śaśin* 'containing a hare' and *śaśāṅka* 'hare-marked' are normal synonyms for *candra* 'moon' and would hardly have been so employed by Brahmanical writers if they had been felt to be Buddhistical terms. Moreover a story associating the hare with the moon is to be found in a work of 'distinctly Brahmanical character', the *Pañcatantra*, compiled at some time within 'the period of the Brahmanical restoration and expansion under the Guptas or just before their empire,'⁵³ i.e. in the third or fourth century A.D. This is the Story of the Elephants and the Hares, of which Evans and Thomson reproduce the version in Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* or 'Ocean of the Rivers of Stories' written between 1063 and 1081.⁵⁴ It tells how a clever hare by pretending to be a messenger of the moon frightens away a herd of elephants that had been destroying the animals around a certain lake. The story occurs in the *Mathnavī*, the long mystical poem by the Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn (1207-1273),⁵⁵ where the immediate

⁵⁰ P. 115. On the association of the hare with the moon in North America see Krappe, pp. 200-201.

⁵¹ Pp. 115-117.

⁵² See S. Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (London, 1888), pp. 190-208.

⁵³ A. Berriedale Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford, 1928), p. 248.

⁵⁴ Pp. 114-115.

⁵⁵ See Reynold A. Nicholson (ed. and transl.), *The Mathnavī of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, IV (London, 1930), 153-154; A. J. Arberry, *Tales from the Masnavi* (London, 1961), p. 247.

source is the *Book of Kalila and Dimna*.⁵⁶ Nicholson in his commentary sees in it the motif which Frazer has called 'The Story of the Perverted Message', and he quotes from Frazer the Hottentot legend which tells how the hare was charged by the moon to bring to mankind the good tidings of their immortality, how he distorted the message and how the moon in her anger threw a stick at him which split his lip.⁵⁷ The *Pañcatantra* has another story about a clever hare, and Evans and Thomson publish a version of it which is interesting as being as remote in time and space from the Sanskrit original as it is possible to imagine: a Gaelic folktale recorded in the twentieth century in the West of Ireland.⁵⁸ This is the story of the hare who tricks a lion into diving into a well to attack his own reflection. This story too is to be found in the *Mathnavi*.⁵⁹ As for the Irish version it must be derived, through literary intermediaries, from the *Directorium Humanae Vitae* of John of Capua, a convert from Judaism who, towards the end of the thirteenth century, rendered into Latin a Hebrew translation of *Kalila and Dimna*.⁶⁰

It is however the names of the hare that provide the clearest evidence of its sacred character. In most Indo-European languages from Persia westwards the original word for 'hare'⁶¹ has been displaced by some epithet apparently adopted for the express purpose of avoiding the use of the animal's real name. Evans and Thomson transcribed a Middle English poem entitled 'The Names of the Hare in English', in which seventy-seven different names and phrases, mainly abusive, are enumerated such as 'were

⁵⁶ On this Arabic translation of a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) version of the *Pañcatantra* see Keith, pp. 357-358.

⁵⁷ See Nicholson, VIII (London, 1940), p. 72; J. G. Frazer, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* (London, 1918), I, 52-53. This motif is associated by Frazer with the Fall of Man. He suggests (p. 51) that 'in the original of the story, which the Jehovistic writer has mangled and distorted, the serpent was the messenger sent by God to bear the glad tidings of immortality to man, but that the cunning creature perverted the message to the advantage of his species and to the ruin of ours.'

⁵⁸ Pp 183-184.

⁵⁹ See Nicholson, II (London, 1926), 50-76; Arberry, pp. 40-47.

⁶⁰ On the *Directorium* see I. G. N. Keith-Falconer, *Kalilah and Dimnah or the Fables of Bidpai* (Cambridge, 1885), pp. lxxiii-lxxv.

⁶¹ The reconstructed Indo-European forms are **kas-* and **kas-n-* and the name apparently meant the 'grey one'. See O. Schrader and O. Nehring, *Reallexikon der indogermanischen Altertumskunde*, I (Berlin and Leipzig, 1917-1923), s.v. *Hase*.

supposed, on their recital, to deliver it into the hunter's power.'⁶² One of these phrases is 'The animal that no one dare name.'^{62a} And yet, strangely enough, in English — as in all the Germanic languages — the old Indo-European word for the hare is still in normal every-day use. Even the countryman's names for it are, as the authors admit, 'affectionate pet names shared by hares and cats';⁶³ they are not substitutes for a name that it was regarded as inauspicious to pronounce. But, leaving aside the Germanic peoples, we shall find the old word in Europe only in a Baltic language that died out in the seventeenth century⁶⁴ and in the Welsh *ceinach*. *Ceinach*, an interesting survival, is not however the ordinary Welsh word for 'hare'. This is *ysgafarnog* (colloquially pronounced '*sgwarnog*') '(long)-eared', a derivative of *ysgafarn* 'ear'. The expression must go back to the old British or Brythonic language, for it occurs in Cornish and as a dialect word has survived the language;⁶⁵ it occurred also in the older stages of Breton.⁶⁶ Evans and Thomson also mention *pryf*, literally 'worm', which is applied to the hare in South Wales. One is tempted to compare the use in the South Western Turkish languages of *qurt*, which likewise means 'worm', in place of *bōri*, the old word for 'wolf'.⁶⁷ The Irish have apparently no equivalent of *ysgafarnog*.⁶⁸ The ordinary Gaelic word for 'hare' is *girrghiadh*, a compound of *gearr* 'short' and *fiadh*, which means 'deer' but was formerly like the English word applied to wild animals in general. Other expressions, perhaps introduced as substitutes for *girrghiadh*, which had come to be felt as the real name of the animal, are: *miol maighe* 'plain (field) beast', *miol buidhe* 'tawny beast' and *miol mong-ruadh* 'red-maned beast'. As for the Latin *lepus* it is according to Ernout and Meillet a borrowing from a Mediterranean

⁶² P. 200. The poem was published and annotated by Professor Alan S. C. Ross in the *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical Society*, Literary and Historical Section 3 (1935), pp. 347–377.

^{62a} P. 201.

⁶³ P. 34.

⁶⁴ Old Prussian *sasins*. On the Slavonic name for the hare see André Vaillant, *Slavia*, IX, 497–499 (497).

⁶⁵ See the *English Dialect Dictionary*, s.v. *scavernick*.

⁶⁶ See K. H. Jackson, *A Historical Phonology of Breton* (Dublin, 1967), p. 600.

⁶⁷ See Sir Gerard Clauson, 'Turks and Wolves', *Studia Orientalia*, XXVIII/2 (Helsinki, 1964), 3–22 (3–5).

⁶⁸ The *sciberneog* of O'Reilly (the *scibhearnach* of other lexicographers) is, so Professor Jackson informs me in a written communication, almost certainly a ghost word; but if genuine, it is a borrowing from the Welsh.

language; they add that the animal has no Indo-European name (in Latin, presumably), 'peut-être parce qu'il était de mauvais augure et qu'on évitait de le nommer.'⁶⁹ One wonders, however, whether the word may not be a native compound meaning something like 'slack-eared'⁷⁰: such is the generally accepted etymology of *lagōs*, the Greek for 'hare'. The Persian name, too, like the Greek and Welsh ones, draws attention to the shape or size of the animal's ears: it is *xargūš* 'donkey-eared', from *xar* 'donkey' and *gūš* 'ear'. So likewise the Ossetes, an Iranian people descended from the Alans of the Middle Ages and the Sarmatians of Antiquity, call the hare *tārqūs* 'long-eared'. On the other hand Pushtu and other Eastern Iranian languages still retain the Indo-European word. It would seem therefore that the ban on the pronunciation of the animal's name was more or less coterminuous with the ban on the eating of its flesh.⁷¹

In their chapter on the hare as a symbol of increase⁷² the authors describe it as the 'favourite animal and attendant spirit' of the Anglo-Saxon goddess Eostre. 'Little else,' they add, 'is known about her, but it has been suggested that her lights, as goddess of the dawn, were carried by hares. And she certainly represented spring fecundity, and love and carnal pleasure that leads to fecundity.'⁷³ To be precise, nothing at all is known about Eostre beyond what we are told in a single passage in one of the works of Bede. He speaks of her as a goddess of 'his people', i.e. the Angles, who had given her name to the month of April (*Eostur-monath*) and to a heathen festival held in that month and afterwards assimilated to the festival of Christ's resurrection.⁷⁴ The authors

⁶⁹ A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1959), s.v. *lepus*.

⁷⁰ This etymology is mentioned, but only to be rejected, by A. Walde, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed. (Heidelberg, 1938), s.v.

⁷¹ On the Iranian names of the hare see Professor Sir Harold Bailey, 'Three Pahlavi Notes', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1931), pp. 424-426 (424-425). He discovered a form of the Indo-European name as a *hapax legomenon* in a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) work, the *Bundahishn*, in which it is glossed by the normal Middle Persian *xargōš*. In two later recensions of the book the passage is corrupt, a clear indication that the copyists had failed to recognise an obsolete word.

⁷² Pp. 127-141.

⁷³ P. 133.

⁷⁴ The passage is quoted by Billson, p. 447, note 1. On the whole question of the Germanic goddess Ostara (on whose existence some scholars have cast doubt) see Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1956), I, 357.

have apparently accepted the identification of this 'goddess of the dawn' with Freyja, the Scandinavian goddess of love and fecundity.⁷⁵ But the hare is not associated with Freyja either. Her carriage, we are told by Snorri, was drawn by a pair of cats — animals, it is true, which like hares were the familiars of witches, with whom Freyja seems to have much in common.⁷⁶ On the other hand, when the authors speak of the hare as the 'companion of Aphrodite and of satyrs and cupids' and point out that 'in the Middle Ages it appears beside the figure of Luxuria',⁷⁷ they are on much surer ground and can adduce the evidence of their illustrations. In fact the hare as an erotic symbol and the hare-hunt as a metaphor for sexual pursuit are amply attested in both classical and medieval literature, the latter of course drawing on the former. For the Ancient World we may refer to the passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Daphne fleeing before Apollo is likened to a hare pursued by a 'Gallic hound';⁷⁸ and for the Middle Ages to Chaucer's Monk, whose fondness for coursing hares has recently been shown to admit of a double interpretation.⁷⁹

However, the aspect of hare folklore with which we are all of us most familiar is the use of the animal's foot or paw as a charm. It used to be and no doubt still is carried about in the pocket "for luck" or to save a man from being touched by "ill-luck". In America card-players carried a rabbit's (hare's) foot in their pocket; and dice-players often muttered *rabbit's foot*, *rabbit's foot* before they threw'.⁸⁰ It was also thought to be effective against bodily ailments, and Evans and Thomson quote from Pepys's *Diary* his account of curing himself of the colic with his hare's

⁷⁵ The identification is ultimately due to Adolf Holtzmann, *Deutsche Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1874), p. 138; it seems now to be completely discredited.

⁷⁶ On Freyja and her cat-drawn carriage see de Vries, II, 312; Brian Branston, *Gods of the North* (London, 1955), p. 160; H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London, 1964), p. 120. A statement that she 'was attended by hares as her train-bearers and light-bearers' is quoted by Billson, p. 447, from a nineteenth-century folklorist. It is, however, the German Holda, the later Frau Holle, who is 'accompanied by a train of hares who act as torch-bearers,' See Krappe, p. 201; *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, III, 1509a.

⁷⁷ P. 123.

⁷⁸ i. 533-539. Quoted by Richard L. Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 30.

⁷⁹ See D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 113 and 255; Hoffman, pp. 28-34. On this theme see also Stephen L. Wailes, 'The Hunt of the Hare in "Das Häslein"', *Seminar*, V/2, 92-101.

⁸⁰ P. 234.

foot.⁸¹ In the Mediterranean region the use of parts of the animal's body as amulets was for the specific purpose of averting the evil eye. The head was so used by the Greeks of Asia Minor and by the Turks also, presumably in imitation of the Greeks; the practice was known in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁸² The hare was said to be particularly suitable for this purpose because of its real or supposed capacity to sleep with its eyes open.⁸³ Another reason, in the case of the Arabs, was the belief that, unlike many other wild animals, it was not one of the riding beasts of the *jinn* and therefore, presumably, not subject to their influence.⁸⁴

Our final comment is on the superstition which sees in the hare a harbinger of fires, if not their direct or indirect cause. In South Northamptonshire, it is said, 'the running of a hare along a street of a village portends fire to some house in the immediate neighbourhood'.⁸⁵ The superstition is by no means extinct. 'I've heard,' so Evans and Thomson were told by one of their informants, 'about the hare running and a fire coming after. In fact, an old character out this way [East Anglia] used to reckon that they were bad luck to have run through your garden because you'd probably have your house on fire before the end of the year'.⁸⁶ This belief is or was widely prevalent in Germany also; and in Silesia the peasants believed in the existence of a flame-spouting fire-hare.⁸⁷ Evans and Thomson have investigated the reactions of the real-life animal to fire. They were told by their witnesses how the hare will stay in a heath-fire until the last and sometimes even leap into the flames. A Suffolk gamekeeper explained this behaviour as follows: 'They don't like the smoke coming behind them. They . . . seem to think that if they get back clear on to the fire, in a way, they'll get out of the scent of it. They jump into the fire. I allus see them come through the fire, come right out of it; and they'll nearly all do that, get through the fire to get back. When all the heath get [sic]

⁸¹ P. 235.

⁸² See Westermarck, I, 442, note 4; S. Seligmann, *Der böse Blick und Verwandtes* (Berlin, 1910), II, 122; William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 3rd ed. (London, 1927), p. 382. In Morocco, according to Westermarck, II, 327, charms against the evil eye are written with the blood of a hare and saffron.

⁸³ Seligmann, II, 122.

⁸⁴ Robertson Smith, p. 129, note 2.

⁸⁵ Black, p. 87. See also Billson, p. 454.

⁸⁶ P. 126.

⁸⁷ *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, III, 1516b.

on fire, March time . . . when there's no cover on the land, they go right through the fire'.⁸⁸

It is in such information, gathered by the authors from the lips of countrymen and field naturalists, that the chief value of their work resides. These descriptions show us the hare as it may well have appeared to primitive man, and they provide us with an answer to the question posed at the beginning of the book. We can better understand, after reading of its strange and mystifying ways in *The Leaping Hare*, why it is that this animal occupies 'such a place in myth and story all over the world'.

⁸⁸ P. 124.